news & notes
October 22, 1993 Volume 4, Number 6 The Rockefeller University

RU to celebrate 50 years of DNA research

Year-long series commemorates Avery lab's revolutionary discovery

To commemorate the 50th anniversary of the discovery at The Rockefeller University that genes are made of DNA—considered by many to be the single most important scientific finding of the 20th century—the university will hold a series of special events throughout the academic year.

"The discovery of Oswald Avery, Colin MacLeod and Maclyn McCarty opened the gateway to the modern era of biology and medicine," said President Torsten Wiesel. "In celebrating this historical event, we celebrate as well The Rockefeller University's enduring mission of diagnosing and curing sickness by uncovering the inner secrets of life."

In 1944, on the sixth floor of The Rockefeller University Hospital, Avery and two colleagues, Colin MacLeod and Maclyn McCarty, discovered that genes are made of deoxyribonucleic acid—DNA. This finding, first published in *The Journal of Experimental Medicine* on Feb. 1, 1944, was totally unexpected. Before Avery, MacLeod and McCarty, no link had ever been seen between the passage of genetic information and the presence of DNA. Their paper revealed the hidden hereditary nature of the thread-like DNA fibers present in all cells. This publication laid the groundwork for the more well publicized discovery by James Watson and Francis Crick of the double-helical structure of DNA molecules.

Professor Norton Zinder, chair of the faculty committee which helped plan the celebration, added: "Avery *et al*'s finding completely altered our way of thinking about biological problems, ushering in a whole new era of science. The finding was so fundamental that much of biological research today is still building on it." Other members of the faculty committee are: Jan Breslow, Titia de Lange, Jeffrey Friedman, Emil Gotschlich and Joshua Lederberg.

The year-long series, which will be held in Caspary Auditorium, will include the following events:

- Tues., Nov. 16, 6:00 P.M. "Early Days of DNA," a public lecture by James Watson, director of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory;
- Wed., Dec. 29 and Thurs., Dec. 30, 10:00 A.M. The Annual Alfred E. Mirsky Christmas Lectures for New York City High School Students, "da Vinci and Darwin in the Molecules of Life," by John Kuriyan, professor, and Stephen Burley, associate professor, The Rockefeller University;
- Wed., Feb. 2, 5:00 P.M. "The Human Genome Project in its Scientific Context," a public lecture by David Botstein, professor and

See ***RU celebrates****, page 2*

RU celebrates 50 years of DNA work

(continued from page 1)

chairman, Department of Genetics, Stanford University School of Medicine;

- Thurs., Feb. 3, 4:00 P.M. "Historical Roundtable," a discussion with key scientists active between the publication of the 1944 Avery, MacLeod and McCarty paper and the 1953 discovery of DNA's double-helical structure;
- Fri., Feb. 4, 3:45 P.M. Scientific symposium on the research areas pursued by the Avery laboratory—immunology, infectious disease and molecular medicine;
- Mon., April 18, 6:00 P.M. "Public Lecture on Ethics and DNA Technology," by Nancy Wexler, professor, Columbia University, and chair of the Joint National Institutes of Health/Department of Energy Human Genome Project's Committee on Ethics;
- Fri., May 6, 3:45 P.M. Scientific symposium on key areas of DNA research at Rockefeller.

An exhibit and banner marking the Avery lab discovery will be installed at the Hospital for its anniversary next week.

"The complementary relation between basic research in the natural sciences and understanding and treatment of human disease was fundamental to the Avery laboratory and remains the guiding principle of the university today," Wiesel said. "This 50th anniversary is a good opportunity for us to celebrate this relationship and to explain the mission, culture and achievements of the university to a new generation of scientists, the university's friends and supporters, and the general public."

For more information, contact the Office of Public Affairs, x8967.